

◆ Peterborough ware from Westbourne

A RARE MIDDLE NEOLITHIC ‘RITUAL’ (?) DEPOSIT FROM THE WEST SUSSEX COASTAL PLAIN

By Mike Seager Thomas

Excavation by Development Archaeology Services at Westbourne, West Sussex, has uncovered a small pit containing an unusually fine assemblage of Neolithic Peterborough ware pottery, including one of only two complete Peterborough ware profiles found in the county to date. This paper discusses their internal and external relationships. Features and pottery of these sorts are widely seen as ritual or symbolic rather than functional (e.g. Drewett 2003; Thomas 1999). The evidence from Westbourne points, however, not to ritual or symbolic practices as an explanation of Peterborough ware pits locally, but to everyday domestic routine.

INTRODUCTION

Excavation by Chris Pine’s Development Archaeology Services on behalf of Bolton Retirement Homes has revealed evidence of Neolithic activity in Westbourne, at the interface between the southern slope of the South Downs and the West Sussex Coastal Plain. The site, which comprised a single pit at the edge of an otherwise archaeologically barren trenching survey (of 11 trenches) (Hall 2008), was located at Chantry Farm, on the eastern side of the B2147 (Foxbury Lane) (SU 7603 0742). It yielded sherds from between three and five Peterborough ware pots, a type of highly decorated Neolithic pottery, which, although widely distributed in southern Britain as a whole (Gibson 2002, 78–80), is currently known from only c. 20 Sussex sites (Table 1), along with small assemblages of fire-cracked flint, daub and debitage from Neolithic flintworking. On the evidence of the pottery, the site should date to around the end of the fourth millennium BC.

The discovery of the site is of particular interest as it comes at a time when the roles of both Neolithic pits and Peterborough ware are being recast interpretatively. Following on from work on the apparently ‘structured’ deposition of pottery in features within the Neolithic henge of Durrington Walls, Wiltshire (Richards & Thomas 1984), a consensus has grown up amongst British prehistorians that both had a ritual, as opposed to a functional explanation. Of pit deposits in southeast England, for example, Paul Garwood has

recently written ‘there seems little question than *most* derived from deliberate acts of assemblage and purposeful spatially-structured deposition; in other words, the outcomes of “special” practices rather than a matter of everyday routine’ [my italics] (Garwood 2009, 3); while Julian Thomas has written of Peterborough ware generally, that it ‘demonstrated a strong orientation towards the past. This theme of continuity is suggested by the use of Peterborough ware in practices, which evoked the ancestral dead or made use of old monuments’ (Thomas 1999, 120). Westbourne gives us a welcome opportunity to consider these views in a specifically Sussex context and to decide whether or not such an interpretative mould is appropriate to it.

So, is the evidence from the site consistent with a symbolic or ritual interpretation, or would it best be considered in a traditional, more functional light? In the *Archaeology of Sussex to AD 2000*, Peter Drewett (2003, 43–4) lists eight Sussex Neolithic sites with pits or possible pits, only one of which yielded Peterborough ware (Selmeiston). To this we can now add Westbourne; possibly Golf Links Lane, Selsey (White 1934); Malling Down (Allen 1995, 29–30), and two as yet unstudied sites — Chalkpit Lane, Lavant, where open area excavations on a later prehistoric settlement by the Chichester District Archaeological Unit revealed two, and possibly more Peterborough ware pits, and Church Road, Chichester, where a small excavation by Archaeology South-East revealed three pits, two of which yielded Peterborough ware (Table 1). That is,

Table 1. Peterborough ware from Sussex. Barely 20 Sussex sites are known to have yielded Peterborough ware, and most of these a few sherds only.

Site	Feature type	Site type	Sub-style/decoration	Reference
Belle Tout	US	unknown	thin, tool impressed body sherd - Ebbsfleet (?)	Seager Thomas unpub.
Church Road, Chichester	pits	unknown	Ebbsfleet	Unpub.
Combe Hill	ditch	causewayed camp	Ebbsfleet (?)	Musson 1950, fig. 3, pl. 1
Crowlink	residual in BA flint cairn/ barrow mound	unknown	Mortlake (?)	Hamilton 2001, fig 11.1
Long Down, Eartham	US	flint mines	Mortlake	Drewett 1983, fig. 9.3
Bullock Down, Eastbourne	sub-surface layers/ 'occupation' spreads	open	Ebbsfleet, Mortlake, Fengate & undecorated	Drewett 1982, fig. 13; Holgate 1988, fig. 3.1
Kiln Combe	buried soil	dry valley fill	undecorated	Bell 1983, 123
Friston	US	unknown	thick, tool impressed body sherd — Mortlake (?)	Curwen 1954, 69
Bury Hill, Houghton	upper fill of ditch	causewayed camp	Mortlake	Drewett 1981, fig. 8
Chalkpit Lane, Lavant	pits	open	Mortlake	J. Kenny pers. comm.
Lavant pipeline	ditch	bi-vallate enclosure (or henge)	Mortlake (associated with c. 3000 BC ¹⁴ C date)	J. Kenny pers. comm.
Malling Down, Lewes	pit	open (?)	tool impressed shoulder	Allen 1995, fig. 6
Castle Hill, Newhaven	US	unknown	tool impressed shoulder	Field 1939, 265
Selmeston	pit (?)	unknown	Mortlake (published as Ebbsfleet)	Drewett 1975, fig. 7, 11–13
Golf Links Lane, Selsey	pit (?)	unknown	undecorated rim	White 1934, fig. 1
West Beach, Selsey	US	unknown	body sherds — Mortlake (?)	Meddens 2007, 211
Slonk Hill, Shoreham	residual in ditch of BA round barrow	unknown	tool impressed shoulder	Bradley 1978, 101, fig. 16.141
Westbourne	pit	open (?)	Mortlake & Ebbsfleet	
Westhamnett	residual in BA pit	unknown	Ebbsfleet (?)	Fitzpatrick 2008, fig. 42
Whitehawk	ditch	causewayed camp	Ebbsfleet	Curwen 1934, fig. 15; 1936, figs 20–22

six comparable sites only. Whatever the answers are to these questions for Westbourne therefore, clearly they will contribute greatly to our understanding the Neolithic in the county.

THE PIT

The site overall was characterized by an uncomplicated sequence of top/ ploughsoil, sub-soil and Brickearth. The pit became visible after the removal of the upper c. 0.6 m of this sequence (Fig. 1). It was sub-circular in shape with (where visible) gently sloping sides, a rounded break of slope between the sides and base, and a flattish to slightly rounded base. At the point it became visible, its maximum width was 0.75 m, its minimum width 0.62 m. The base of the pit,

which was cut into undisturbed Brickearth, lay c. 0.8 m below the modern landsurface. A single fill only was distinguishable. This comprised very dark grey-brown clayey silt, similar texturally to the overlying sub-soil but both stonier and less clayey than the underlying Brickearth. The principal pottery finds lay decoration-down in two large but fragmented pieces, one close to the centre of the pit, two or three centimetres above its base and nine to ten below the top of the visible fill, the other on the base of the pit, near its western edge (Fig. 2). The struck flint was spread evenly throughout the visible fill.

The conventional interpretation of a feature identified at this depth (and that favoured by the writer of the evaluation report, Hall 2008) would be that it had been truncated. Were this the case,

we would have to allow the *possibility* that the finds assemblage, too, was incomplete. In part, this view is supported by the different sedimentology of the sub-soil and the underlying Brickearth, which is perhaps best explained by the presence of another, invisible feature — perhaps an ancient ploughsoil, as the evaluation report suggested. But, owing to the depth to which soil development reaches on the Coastal Plain, prehistoric features there are hardly ever visible above about c. 0.5 m, well below the depth to which ploughing usually reaches (cf. Seager Thomas 1998, fig. 2). Thus, while admitting that it is impossible to rule out truncation and a concomitant loss of artefactual material, there is no reason to assume it. Indeed for the pottery, which was concentrated on or close to the base of the visible feature, I would suggest the opposite.

PETERBOROUGH WARE FROM WESTBOURNE

The Neolithic pottery assemblage from the pit comprises 200-odd sherds with a weight of approximately 2.4 kg. Most of these derive from a single jar belonging to the Mortlake sub-style of the Peterborough ware pottery tradition (vessel 1, Fig. 3:1). Slightly less than half of the vessel was present. It is thick-bodied, has a pronounced rim overhanging a deep cavetto or neck, and a more or less rounded base, and its body is encrusted with twisted-cord impressions, which form a series of horizontal bands comprising alternating chevrons. The rim is decorated with curvilinear twisted-cord impressions, which continue on the inner surfaces of the rim and neck (Fig. 4). A blunt stick, instead of the more usual fingertip, has been used to impress a series of small pits in the cavetto (cf. Bury Hill: Drewett 1981). Its fabric is silty, with rare iron-oxide nodules, and sparsely tempered with medium sand to small pebble-sized burnt flint (Fig. 5). The exterior surfaces of the vessel are mostly oxidized, with just a dark cloud in the area of the neck; the interior mostly unoxidized.

Associated with this were a dozen or so sherds from at least two and,

possibly, as many as four other vessels. Vessel 2 is, in *my* opinion, another variant of the Mortlake sub-style (Fig. 3:2). Like vessel 1, it has a pronounced rim decorated with twisted-cord impressions, but the rim is more sinuous and the cavetto, fingertip rather than tool-impressed. The two sherds shown in Figure 3:3, which are decorated with fingernail impressions, may belong to it or — more likely —

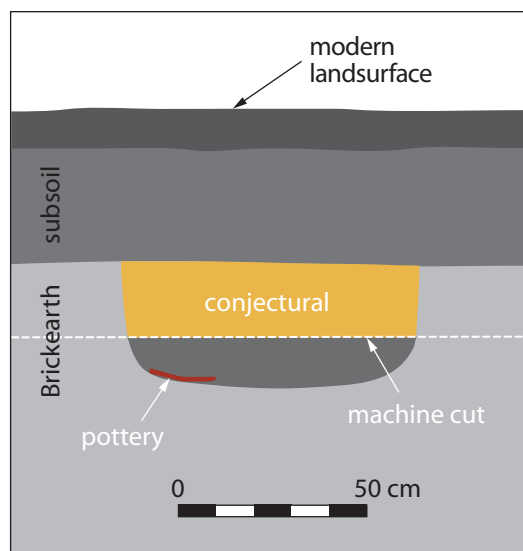


Fig. 1. Schematic section of the Westbourne Peterborough ware pit. The feature fulfils some of the characteristics of a 'Neolithic ritual pit', but not all.



Fig. 2. An unusually fine Peterborough ware assemblage of decorated sherds.

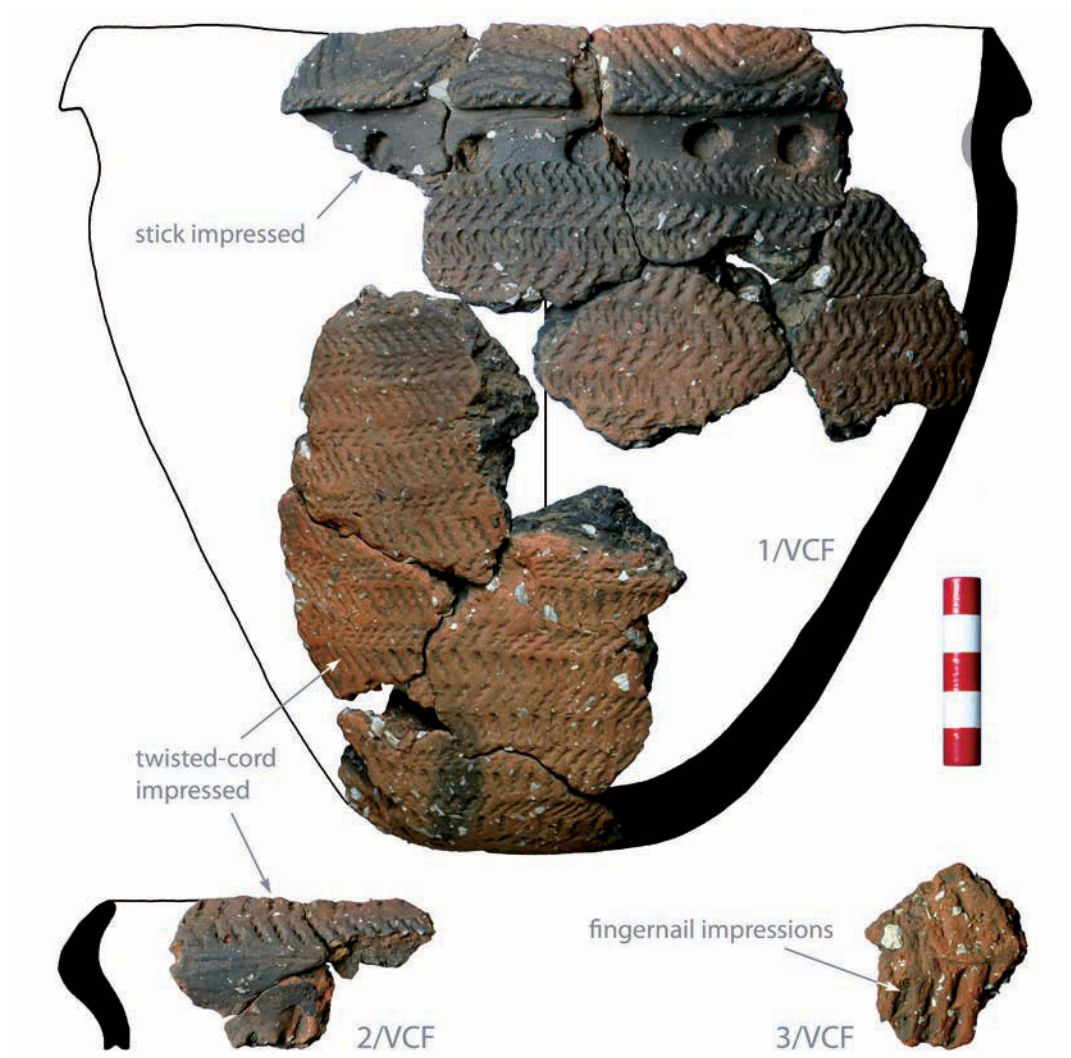


Fig. 3. Westbourne's vessels 1–3. Vessel 1 is only one of two Peterborough ware vessels from the county, the profiles of which can be reconstructed in their entirety. Scale 50%.

other Peterborough ware vessels. All are in the same silty, flint-tempered fabric as vessel 1. The last sherd cannot be reconstructed with certainty and is not illustrated, but it has a concave neck and appears to have a slashed, expanded rim, and is in a sandy fabric, moderately tempered with medium sand to large granule-sized burnt flint. It could be a post Deverel-Rimbury (i.e. Late Bronze Age) intrusion (cf. Seager Thomas 2008, 47), but it can just about be accommodated within the Peterborough ware tradition's *typologically* earlier Ebbsfleet sub-style

or even the preceding Decorated Bowl tradition, and, given the apparent stratigraphic integrity of the context, one or other of the latter seems its most likely attribution.

DATING

Typological evidence suggests that the Peterborough ware tradition's sub-styles, Ebbsfleet, Mortlake and Fengate, were sequential (Smith 1974), whereas radiocarbon evidence suggests that the tradition

as a whole dates to between c. 3600 and 2300 cal. BC (Gibson & Kinnes 1997) — depending on the Three Age System school to which one belongs, the Middle (the current favourite), the Late or the later Neolithic! The evidence from Westbourne is consistent with and supports the radiocarbon evidence in that the assemblage, in addition to Mortlake sub-style vessels, includes a sherd, albeit a tiny one, that is definitely *not* in the Mortlake sub-style but can be accommodated within the Ebbsfleet sub-style. The assemblage's dominant silty, coarsely flint-tempered fabric moreover is closely paralleled in the assemblage from Church Road, Chichester, which comprises material in the Ebbsfleet sub-style (but see below).

RESEARCH ISSUES

Apart from date, the principal focus of research into Peterborough ware in recent years has of course been ritual. As noted above, there is a growing consensus amongst Neolithic specialists that Peterborough ware had some kind of enhanced meaning, a view attributable in part to the tradition's preference — irrespective of sub-style — for decorated bowls, over the wider and by implication more functional range of vessels associated with earlier Neolithic pottery traditions (Thomas 1999, 107; Howard 1981), and in part to the occurrence of different styles of Peterborough ware in different types of contexts: for example, old monuments (the Ebbsfleet and Mortlake sub-styles), rivers (the Mortlake sub-style) and pits (the Mortlake and Fengate sub-styles) (Thomas 1999, 111 & table 5.11). If the styles were contemporary and belonged to a single pottery tradition, why, the argument goes, were they not all deposited together? There are problems here, notably that posed by the overlap between different Peterborough ware sub-styles, which has and continues to cause specialists to attribute similar vessels to different sub-styles (I should note here that rim forms similar to that of vessel 1 have been attributed to both the Ebbsfleet and Fengate as well as the Mortlake sub-style: Drewett 1982, 53; Hamilton & Seager Thomas 2005, 21 & fig. 36.14; Robertson-Mackay 1987, 89), and the fact that Peterborough ware is sometimes associated with undecorated wares (Table 1). Nonetheless the Westbourne assemblage, in so far as it is dominated by sherds belonging to the Mortlake sub-style, fits



Fig. 4. Twisted cord impressions on the inner surfaces of the rim and neck of Westbourne's vessel 1. Scale 50%.



Fig. 5. The site's coarsely flint tempered Peterborough ware fabric. Scale 150%.

this pattern well. There is, however, no *internal* evidence to support this claim for Westbourne. The sherds comprising the assemblage were not obviously 'structured', and vessel 1, although deposited on/close to the base of the pit, was incomplete and, as well as the sherds from the other vessels, shared it with three other artefact types (flint debitage, fire-cracked flint and daub) and as such fulfils none of the criteria usually used to distinguish ritual from other, more everyday deposits (e.g. Hill 1994, 4).

A second issue is the cultural attribution of the material. Across southeast England, the forms and

fabrics of Peterborough ware jars belonging to the different sub-styles can be very similar, suggesting the existence of a widespread and homogeneous southeastern Peterborough ware pottery tradition. This is of interest because of the rather different impression given by the preceding decorated bowl tradition, which, in Sussex, is represented by very different assemblages (such as those from the Trundle and Whitehawk: Curwen 1929; 1931; 1934 etc.; Whittle 1977, figs 16–18). However, recent excavation has eroded these differences somewhat. On the one hand, every Peterborough ware vessel is subtly different; on the other, some decorative and morphological traits — such as the tool-impressed pits in the cavetto of Mortlake sub-style bowls from Westbourne and Bury Hill — appear to be concentrated geographically, indicating a degree of local individuality in pottery making. For the Westbourne assemblage, however, the idea of an homogeneous southeastern Peterborough ware pottery tradition holds good. Although a very rare find, it has close typological parallels in Peterborough ware assemblages from Lavant, Badshot Long Barrow in Surrey (Keiller & Piggett 1939, figs 55 & 58), and Sandwich in Kent (Cleal 1995, fig. 15). Moreover, the Lavant assemblages, the aforementioned Ebbsfleet sub-style assemblage from Church Road, Chichester, and a decorated bowl assemblage from unpublished excavations by Northamptonshire Archaeology at Drayton Quarry, Chichester, incorporate near identical fabrics.

FLINTWORK

Spread evenly through the fill of the pit were 11 pieces of flint, hard-hammer struck from three different nodules. Nine come from a single cloudy grey nodule with a thick, slightly abraded cortex, almost certainly from a Head deposit. These consist of six pieces of formless debitage, part of a core, a well-formed flake and two short blades, one with a negative hinge-fracture in its outermost surface. None are retouched, nor is there any use-wear. It can be assumed therefore that they represent the waste product of tool preparation, rather than flint tool using activity *per se*. They are not closely diagnostic chronologically, but their nature is wholly consistent with what would be expected of Middle/Late Neolithic debitage.

The remaining pieces are of a patinated, honey coloured flint with a thick cortex, again from a

Head deposit, and a dark grey flint with a thick cortex of unknown but probably similar origin. The honey coloured flint appears to have been struck from a blade core of earlier Neolithic or Mesolithic type. It has been worked into a point to form an awl and shows clear traces of use-wear around the point. Given its early morphology — and its patination — it is suggested that it pre-dates, and had nothing to do with the pit in which it was found. The dark grey flint, which has traces of blunting around the striking platform, looks like debitage from the production of another early core, and once again it is suggested that it pre-dates, and had nothing to do with the pit in which it was found.

CONCLUSION: A RITUAL PIT OR NOT?

It will come as no surprise to those who have read my pottery and excavation reports in the *Collections* and elsewhere (Seager Thomas 2006; 2008 etc.) to learn that I am antagonistic towards the *routine* attribution of a symbolic or ritual role to archaeological features. My complaint is twofold. These attributions are predicated on what is in my opinion a selective reading of the ethnographic and the archaeological record, and a determinist belief, bequeathed to archaeology by

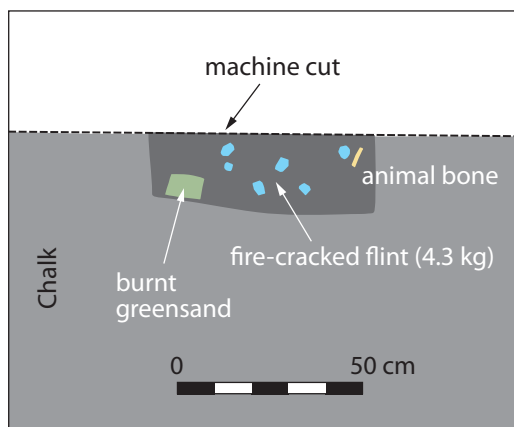


Fig. 6. Schematic section of a Peterborough ware pit excavated at Chalkpit Lane, Lavant. In addition to the finds recorded in the section it yielded two sherds of Peterborough ware and a single flint flake. Overall the Lavant pits fulfil even fewer characteristics of the Neolithic ritual pit than Westbourne.

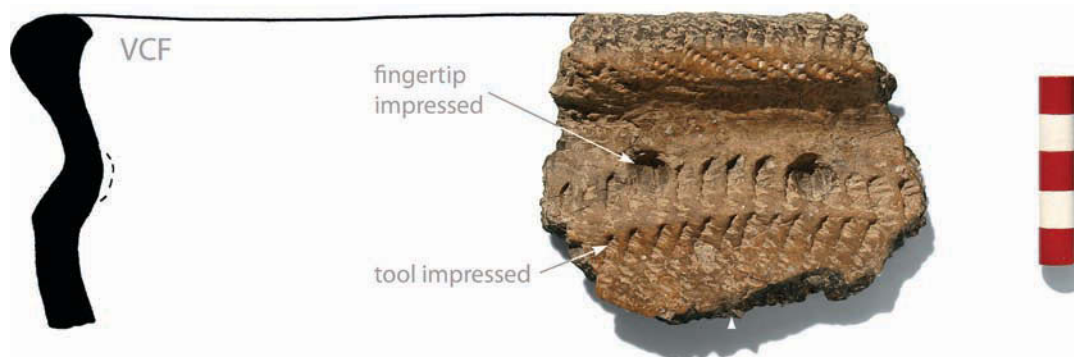


Fig. 7. Chalkpit Lane, Lavant. Large (c. 19 cm rim diameter) Peterborough ware bowl recovered from the pit shown in Figure 6. Scale 50%.

postmodern anthropology, that in a given situation all people behave in a predictable way — in this case, dig a hole, whitewash it (that is to say, deposit something), and fill it in! It is useful of course to be reminded of the possibility of interpretations that are alien to our own culture; but in my opinion, for an interpretation to have value it must stand on its own and not on some preconceived theory. To paraphrase G.K. Chesterton (in *Tremendous Trifles; Secret of a Train*, 1909), ‘throwing away something will not always mean ritual ...’.

The case for the Neolithic ritual pit was best made by Julian Thomas in *Understanding the Neolithic* (1999). Morphologically there are similarities between the Neolithic ritual pit, as perceived by Thomas, and the pit excavated at Westbourne. Contrasting the former with Iron Age pits, which he considered to have had a functional role, he saw Neolithic pits as shallow (almost always less than a metre deep), bowl-shaped and rapidly backfilled with few fills. They also often contained burnt material. Except for rapid backfilling, which cannot be demonstrated for Westbourne owing to its physical or pedological truncation, all of these are true of Westbourne. His most compelling evidence however was for ritual or symbolic practices — apparently whole, placed pots, a high ratio of flint tools to debitage, fresh unused or whole broken objects, etc. (Thomas 1999, 64–6, figs 4.1–2). This, while apparently present in some Sussex earlier Neolithic assemblages (Drewett 2003, 43–4), is conspicuously absent from Westbourne, where both the combination of different categories of artefactual material and the location of this artefactual material within in the pit (assuming that the pit was not massively

truncated), were much more ‘random’. This is much better explained in terms of the casual discard of everyday household waste (cf. Schiffer 1976, 129) — in this case, the by-product of accidental breakage (the pottery), flint-knapping (the flint debitage), cooking (the fire-cracked flint), etc. Furthermore, although the sub-style to which most of the pottery belongs is what would be expected from a Peterborough ware pit, nothing about it ‘demonstrated a strong orientation towards the past...’.

My conclusion therefore is that the Westbourne pit is *not* a ritual pit, at least as Thomas perceived them (it is impossible to say what the pit *per se* was dug for), and that its fill is indicative of *conventional* domestic activity in the vicinity.

It would of course be every bit as unreasonable for me arbitrarily to apply this interpretation to the other Sussex sites with Peterborough ware pits (Table 1), as it would be for another archaeologist arbitrarily to apply Julian Thomas’s interpretation to Westbourne. The evidence from Lavant, however, the only other Sussex Peterborough ware pit site with a level of data resolution similar to that from Westbourne (Figs 6 & 7), suggests a broadly similar interpretation. (Note in particular the range and the distribution of finds.) The weight of evidence from the county as a whole, therefore, points not to ritual or symbolic practices as an explanation for the Peterborough ware pit, but to those domestic activities traditionally associated by archaeologists with everyday routine. If the roles of Neolithic pits and Peterborough ware in Sussex are to be recast interpretatively, this alternative to Julian Thomas’s ritual pit must surely be part of the mould.

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